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ABSTRACT

Respite child care is a form of short-term care provided in a family day care home or a child care center for the purpose of helping families that are experiencing stress. At an average cost of \$300 to \$400 per month, respite care is cost effective. Since 1983, California's child care resource and referral agencies have administered a small respite child care program with funds provided through the State Department of Education, Child Development Division. Children and families are referred by child protection workers, medical personnel, social workers, teachers, and other professionals. Resource and referral agencies in local communities make referrals to child care providers in the area. As funds permit, agencies work closely with the referring person or program to find the care that best meets the families' needs. Each year since 1983, local resource and referral agencies have reported that their respite funds are expended by mid-year. To stretch funds for 12 months, counselors allocate assistance to only the most desperate families; thus countless families in dismal circumstances are not served. It is concluded that the need for increased respite funding is urgent. The Children's Roundtable Project of the California Children's Council is briefly described and roundtable participants are listed. (RH)

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A REPORT



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California Childrens Council





**RESPITE CHILD CARE
IN CALIFORNIA:
ALTERNATIVES FOR
AT-RISK FAMILIES**



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RESPITE CHILD CARE IN CALIFORNIA PROVIDING ALTERNATIVES FOR AT RISK FAMILIES

RESPITE CHILD CARE IS COST EFFECTIVE

On an average, \$400 of respite child care funds can be decisive in preventing family disintegration. Compared to the cost of out-of-home care, which can be as high as \$4800 per month per child, it is a most economical and prudent investment.

WHAT IS RESPITE CHILD CARE

Respite child care is care provided for less than 24 hours in a family day care home or in a child care center. It is always short-term care (no longer than three months) designed to help families who are in stress because of medical or emotional problems, or who are going through difficult transitions and need relief.

Good respite child care is a very pure form of child abuse prevention. It can provide relief and direction to families BEFORE their circumstances deteriorate to a point which necessitates more formal and costly intervention on the part of the social service system. It also serves as a bridge to additional child care and other services that high risk families require. Respite child care has provided an alternative to many families who need short term help to get through a difficult time or an emergency. The average amount expended per family is \$400 per month.

HOW RESPITE CHILD CARE CAN HELP

Families in stress need choices and alternatives. Child care services are an important and sometimes a crucial part of treatment and support for families. Child care can offer assistance in a variety of ways.

Child care can:

* Prevent children from being separated from their parents and being placed in foster care during medical emergencies, divorce, incarceration, loss of job, or homelessness.

John and his three children, ages 3, 5 and 7 were referred to a local child care resource and referral program by Child Protective Services and Friends Outside. John had gone to the Welfare Department to turn over custody of his children because he felt he could not adequately provide for them. His wife had recently been incarcerated, and as a result he had missed a lot of work. He was unable to find adequate child care, and said he had "gone through" five babysitters in two months. He had no extended family in the area to help and was fearful that he would be fired.

One of the children needed medical care for a leg injury sustained in an auto accident before his mother was incarcerated. John's small rental house had just been sold, and he had received notice to move. Pacific Gas and Electric was threatening to turn off his gas and electricity.

All of these stresses combined with the absence of the mother brought John to the county welfare department. Upon referral from Child Protective Services, the local child care resource and referral program was able to enroll all three children in its respite pro-

gram for three months. This gave John an opportunity to begin to cope with the emotional and financial problems he faced, and to stabilize his work performance. The child care center which provided the respite care played a major role in assisting the family and helped them to establish a network of resources. It was never necessary to separate the family.

Child care can:

- * Provide important respite to families under stress and facing a variety of emergency situations.

Tanya is four years old and had been removed from her mother's custody by Child Protective Services because she had been left home while her mother, Sue, worked a graveyard shift job at minimum wage. Sue had been offered the same job for the day shift but was unable to find any child care. She could not afford to pay for child care out of her \$3.50 per hour salary and the waiting lists and the subsidized programs were very long. She asked for the graveyard shift job because she felt it was safest for Tanya. She put her daughter to bed before leaving for work and most of the time was home before Tanya awakened. Sue was not aware that she had broken the law when she left her daughter unattended. Child Protective Services told her she must prove she had child care for Tanya before the child could be returned home.

Distraught, Sue turned to a local counseling program for help and advice. The counselor referred her to the local resource and referral agency suggesting they might help with respite child care. Sue arranged with her employer to transfer to days, Tanya was enrolled in a child care program and was returned home. After two months Sue received a raise and was able to pay for her child care although it was still a great hardship.

WHY RESPITE CARE IS COST EFFECTIVE

Child care can be provided at an average of \$300 per month for a pre-schooler and \$400 per month for a toddler/infant. To place a child in an institutional setting generally costs from \$4000 to \$4800 per month per child. Respite care can help maintain families like John's or Sue's providing long term savings and better solutions for children.

HOW RESPITE CARE IS PROVIDED

Since 1983 California's child care resource and referral agencies have administered a small (\$1,000,000) respite child care program. Funds are provided through the State Department of Education, Child Development Division. Children and families are referred by Child Protection Workers, medical sources, social workers, teachers and other professionals. Resource and referral agencies in the communities make referrals to child care providers in their area. These services are free. The agencies work closely with the referring person or program to find the care that best meets the families' needs. It is an efficient system because the resource and referral agencies are knowledgeable

about the available resources and can move quickly to meet the families' needs. Under present regulations, care is provided for no more than three months.

EXPANSION IS NEEDED NOW

Each year since 1983, local resource and referral agencies report that their respite funds are fully expended by mid-year. To stretch the dollars for twelve months, counselors must prioritize service delivery among families who are desperately in need of this short term assistance while countless families in desperate circumstances go without service.

The resource and referral respite program has demonstrated its efficiency and effectiveness. However, there has been no expansion since its inception. This means that every year thousands of families go unserved; many children enter the foster care system and spend time in institutions unnecessarily.

The need for increased respite funding is urgent and dramatic.

MORE FUNDING FOR RESPITE CHILD CARE

More funding for respite care is one of the best ways to maintain children at home, assist high risk families, prevent child abuse, and save money.

The California Children's Council
Children's Roundtable Project

The California Children's Council is a non-profit corporation dedicated to the public benefit in the arena of children's services. It incorporated in 1983, with the core of its original board of directors coming from the membership and staff of the State of California's Governor's Advisory Committee on Child Development during the years 1977 to 1985.

The Council is organized to serve the children and families of California by promoting appropriate research, consultation, and public education which recognize and build upon the competence of parents. The Council works to achieve this goal by:

- Instructing and training individuals to improve their abilities and to develop their capabilities to work with young children and their families.
- Instructing the public about early childhood development and thereby benefiting the community through increased understanding of the needs of young children.
- Publishing educational materials in the public interest.
- Conducting public discussion groups, panels, workshops and conferences on topics within the field of early childhood development.
- Providing management consultation and other technical assistance to human service organization.
- Promoting and conducting research and public education in child development, child care, and special education.

Recently, two of the Council's principal activities have been annual "Care for the Children" activities and a special project called the California Children's Roundtable. The "Care for the Children" events have included family picnics, marches, and press conferences, all organized as public education activities in the realms of family life and child care needs. The Children's Roundtable is a policy seminar conducted with resources provided by the James Irvine Foundation. Through the Roundtable, the Council was able to complete a set of issue papers on topics important to child care and public policy; a photo essay on poverty, work, and family life; and the design for a study of parental attitudes toward school readiness and the "hurried child."

Additional information on the Roundtable projects can be obtained by writing to the Council, 17516 Labrador St., Northridge, CA 91325.

California Children's Roundtable
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